Self-care for the stressed at work: humility, detachment and self-compassion as key enablers of healing and hope

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INTRODUCTION

The considerable and growing extent of workplace stress is significant. Aside from productivity effects, it causes personal suffering, and from the perspective of inner meaning and negative self-talk, it is poorly understood. So often, work motivation, enrichment and satisfaction are studied and less attention is paid to stress and suffering (Qamari & Tjahjono, 2021).

Moreover, despite work being of considerable human endeavour and commitment, when things go awry, holistic responses related to psycho-spiritual themes are embryonic or not focussed on self-care choices especially during stress and/or when meaning and inner-sense making are impaired (Devenish-Meares, 2021). When people lose hope and meaning and blame themselves and exacerbate their stress, it is important to use all necessary treatment, self-reflection and care options; from medicine, psychiatry and spirituality (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017). In this work, the term; psycho-spirituality is key and points to the need to focus on integrated approaches to meaning or lack thereof at work (Devenish-Meares, 2015). This is the "immaterial inner core of human personality (and) refers to the fact that the inner world has no separate spiritual and psychological compartments" (Benner, 1998, p. 540).

AIM and OBJECTIVES

The paper (and related conference presentation) aims to extend personal responses to critical workplace stressors and explores how staff, leaders and treatment practitioners need to adapt and rethink their personal and teams' approaches to stress and mentally healthy workplaces. It focuses on how to re-examine genuine commitment to self-care (with a new model presented), leader mindfulness, employee mental health and wellbeing – especially, what is meaningful and how it aligns or augments inner wellbeing which draws in approachable spirituality for all.

METHODS

Self-caring responses to workplace stress calls for intuitive, even idiosyncratic and self-focused approaches and ones that draw from all that is available to support the worker: including psychology, psychiatry, medicine, and spirituality.

Bricolage, which is about using information and material from a wide variety of sources, is an emerging methodology in business. It lends itself well to engaging with the personal, complex and subjective nature of the inquiry: the stressed self (Yardley, 2008). Stress calls for an intuitive, even idiosyncratic and self-focussed approaches and ones that draw from all that is available to support the worker: including psychiatry, medicine, and spirituality. To give effect to the bricolage, a heuristic inquiry process was used to matches the idiosyncratic nature of human experience to intuitive self-care choices. This approach also urges the practitioner and leader to search for and co-opt all, new and necessary approaches to stress alleviation and wellbeing support.

This is about new ways to conceptualise and respond to suffering, stress and anxiety as much as to challenge fixed, unhelpful or problematic ways of responding (Moustakas, 1990). In bricolage, the researcher is a reflective insider seeking to construct options by being open to constant change, challenge, and criticism. As has been suggested, in such contexts, the researcher is "someone who uses whatever is to hand to solve problems" (Northey, Tepperman & Albanese, 2009, p. 83). This mirrors, at least to some extent, the sufferer who may seek hope and healing wherever they can find it, or someone to support them in their sense-making.

Bricolage works intuitively with 'what is' or what can be co-opted, It even adopts an eclectic approach working "across modalities, opening up the researcher to new frameworks, explanations and responses even where these may not previously have been recognised or explored together" (Devenish-Meares, 2017, p. 7). Such an inquiry process is given particular expression by Moustakas' (1990) heuristic inquiry approach which is about the researcher

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growing in self-awareness and self-discovery by using subjective immersion, illumination, openness, explication, and a synthesis process. Of relevance here is the seminal work by Levi-Strauss (1966) who proposed bricolage for studies into the human condition, using whatever materials are to hand, necessary, and useful to produce an outcome; and as a sense-making approach to the human issues. In the adoption of bricolage, my aim is an improved self-care model. As Maxwell (2005) argues a conceptual framework is:

something that is constructed, not found. It incorporates pieces that are borrowed from elsewhere, but the structure, the overall coherence, is something that you build, not something that exists ready-made. It is important for you to pay attention to the existing theories and research that are relevant to what you plan to study, because these are often key sources for understanding what is going on with these phenomena. (p. 42)

Specifically, Moustakas' (1990) heuristic inquiry process was selected for the study. The heuristics approach adopts a reflective, self-care processes to highlight when inner self-condemnation or self-judgments prohibit self-kindly considerations which *may,* with support, lead to a focus on care responses. Heuristics is also about self-dialogue with lived experience and seeking to stay with the question less intensely, yet seek new insights (Sela-Smith, 2020). Where possible, heuristics is integrated with inner sense-making, thereby breaking new ground by comparing two previously integrated reflective approaches (Weick, 1995).

Anderson (2000, 2004) affirms subjective forms of inquiry into the human condition. Such approaches, being about inherently personal matters require a process which remained constantly open to refinement, intuitive reflection and challenge. Yet, it is also about being tender towards oneself and not judging oneself harshly. As Anderson (2000) says, "compassion allows us to ask the most meaningful questions and guides our hypotheses and speculations toward rich and expansive theories regarding the nature of the human experience" (p. 33).

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION:

Work can, even given the broadest non-religious definition of spirituality be about the search for meaning at work. In fact, "on one level, it can also be viewed as a spiritual quest, one that allows human beings to become fully alive wherever and whatever their work happens to be" (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017, 43). Instead, loss of hope, disconnection and self-blame can occur. In other words, stress can impair one being fully engaged with and finding meaning in and at work.

Much meaning-related research is about engagement, wellbeing and resilience particularly to increase motivation and work effort and far less about when these aspects fail (Pattakos &

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Dundon, 2015). Noting that stress creates suffering and affects the workplace in a myriad of ways, the author conducted a five (5) year applied research project which searched for and located new self-caring choices from a wide variety of disciplines in response to meaning impairment and self-judgments.

From an intuitive and recursive search, noting Anderson (2004), self-compassion, humility and meaningful detachment were located from positive psychology and spirituality respectfully, as personal and creative responses to meaning impairment, self-judgment, self-blame and poor self-esteem. These choices, and that is what they are, were found to assist those who were detached from work with reduced lines of support. In other words, simply being (sent) away from work may appear to circuit breaker i.e. it appears reasonable to remove the person from causation issues/events. However, research found that physical separation from work is not enough as people may still ruminate painfully and hence, without self-compassion stance treatment could become rather problematic (Neff, 2003a).

In other words, from recent literature, psychological detachment from work alone is not sufficiently therapeutic nor helpful, which suggests that the nature of detachment may be important (Montero-Marin, Prado-Abril, Demarzo, Gascon, & García-Campayo, 2014). Then as McDonald (2010) asserts, one must also note what one has become attached to and see the challenges that malaption or inability to detach can bring.

Self-compassion

Neff's (2003b) self-compassion concept which is located in positive psychology defined as "individuals observing their thoughts" in a non-judgmental way (Neff, 2003a, p. 224). It goes futrher than mindfulness which may not necessarily seem to include deliberate self-caring choices to do with kindness and acting differently in the context of lived experience (Neff, 2003a, 2009). In fact, as will be seen, self-compassion although including mindfulness as a key aspect, goes further than just being in a certain state, as important as this can be.

Self-compassionate reflection and related care choices creates opportunities for meaning engagement, better co-opt resources and build focussed responses in times of crisis (Devenish-Meares, 2015). In particular, the research offers actionable strategies such as pre-crisis initiatives, "self-care" value adds that serve both individual and team, and how personal values and choices drive stress alleviating action and getting stressful events and issues into meaningful perspective (Rohr, 2010).

It was found that mental health responses could be better grounded in self-compassion praxis and related spirituality to assist workplace stress and suffering and possibly even inform aspects of PTSD care. So this research not only extended theory and praxis in terms of self-compassion as a key self-care choice. It extended Moustakas' heuristics inquiry approach and found it relevant to psycho-spiritual self-care and inner-meaning, particularly to address inner

self-critical rules with compassion self-talk to address self-condemnation (Bassett, 1995, Neff, 2003). It does this by allowing a new form of self-kindly inner focus and indwelling to bring about healing.

Humility

Initutive reflection and analysis of the stress condition also located Franciscan Priest, Fr Richard Rohr's (2007) humility motif which is about non-judgmental and tender self-awareness and standly further away from the presenting issue and not getting enmeshed in it. Noting this is about accepting things in a self-kindly way, as they are and not how we wish them to be, it seemed this could be extended beyond purely spiritual uses to aid the stressed worker. The relationship between humility and self-compassion was also noted. Breaking new ground, humility had not been used in this way nor had it been used to augment self-care; this is done by acknowledging imperfections, change, or failure without negativity. Recalling heuristics, this view challenges negative self-perceptions and presented the option of an integrated approach for the stressed and their carers.

In terms of the paper's aims, again such humility is a tender, self-awareness choice. As it pertains to the draft conceptual framework, humility assists in self-management and psycho-spiritual meaning making alongside self-compassion and meaningful detachment; further integrative research in conjunction with self-compassion is encouraged. Overall, and especially in the context of the Defence community, humility is highlighted as a self-care choice. It also reinforced the need for leaders to consider humility not only for psycho-spiritual soldier self-care, recovery and mental fitness, but also as an honest, albeit intrinsic, self-assessment tool.

Similar to Neff, Rohr's (2007) humility work spoke of a tender and self-caring observation at one's circumstances, as they are, without judgment. This is not how we wish life to be. It enacts self-acceptance to address harsh self-blame. Tender humility, and not the old medieval form of self-subjugation, was found to enable the stressed, mental health practitioners and leaders to admit that they needed to do more to care for stressed and suffering workers (Devenish-Meares, 2016). In this and not dissimilar to the applied humility concept advanced by Rohr (2007, 2010), the humble "neither ignore nor ruminate about their shortcomings" (Barnard & Curry, 2011, p, 3).

Meaningful detachment

"A newer form of psycho-spiritual detachment to support those suffering at work." (Devenish-Meares, 2017).

In the context of those experiencing stress at work, this paper located a third, psycho-spiritually focussed, self-choice aspect: meaningful detachment. The paper meets the need to offer a more comparative analysis of the detachment motif briefly introduced in Paper 2, bear-

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ing in mind it, too, came to form a part of the thesis' emerging conceptual self-care framework. It took as its primary question:

In times of inadequacy, failure, and suffering, how can Rohr's (2007) particular detachment motif support psychological detachment and what does it offer the sufferer? (Devenish-Meares, 2017, p. 7).

While psychological detachment is helpful in terms of workplace stress, recent literature says that that people may still ruminate painfully while away from work (Chopko, Facemire, Palmieri, & Schwartz, 2016). There is a risk that people may be alone, disconnected from support and not able to readily engage with or be supported in personal reflection; psycho-spirituality can help address stress.

The research extended ways an individual can engage with psycho-spiritual sense-making and, hence, meaningfully detach from stress as an enhancement to psychological detachment. Building on the earlier papers, the research used a bricolage-focussed approach and inner sense-making (Weick, 1995). It also further explored Richard Rohr's spirituality of detachment as it relates to humility. Again, each theme was revisited in terms of the emerging conceptual model in support of a stressed worker's self-care choices.

This paper uses the intuitive even reflective process of finding, intuitively exploring and integrating what arose in reading and synthesis: humility, self-compassion (as a form of self-love), and detachment. What became apparent in the recursive process of reflecting and trial and error was that these choices shared much in common; especially that each is about a tender, self-acceptance and self-love of the self no matter what has happened.

Such reflective choices are about addressing negative self-perceptions, rumination and over-identification, and shifting (heuristic) awareness to seeing, knowing, without harsh self-judgment, and by letting go in a self-kindly way. For the first time, a self-compassionate form of meaningful detachment was proposed—ostensibly psycho-spiritual or simply meaning-related—to address the identified concern that psychological detachment is itself not enough because people may still ruminate problematically on their condition.

Breaking new ground, it was shown that Moustakas' heuristic method enables the researcher to reflect critically and tenderly on the subject matter so as to assist the stressed struggling to live with and make sense of issues causing stress and anxiety. Again, noting previous research, those who are suffering may adopt a negative heuristic approach to their predicament. That is, they may be ruminating in an unhelpful way, engaged in problematic self-dialogue, and using pre-existing responses which are not working.

The paper also speculated that Moustakas's (1990) approach could be used by pastoral and (allied) health practitioners, and the stressed, themselves. This is about noticing, encouraging new thinking, and turning inwards in a self-caring, self-kindly, and non-judgmental way so

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as to activate self-loving choices. It was suggested that given the researcher collects, examines, and re-interprets information in new ways, then why not the practitioner and the stressed (Hiles 2001)? This requires more study; however, from a reflective viewpoint and in terms of my learning journal and supervisory feedback, it appears to have merit. This is about challenging long tacit knowing, improved intuition and developing more helpful, internal frames of reference (Moustakas, 1990).

Overall, the research and related presentation determined some key choices that break new ground to make a real difference to how we navigate and address stress; including:-

· **Tender 'humility**': this is about self-acceptance regardless perceived failures and incompleteness which if not addressed can lead to self-judgment. These are not the last word, rather action based self-care support strategies are (Rohr, 2007).

· **Self-compassion:** Guided by bricolage, the research extended self-compassion into the area of workplace stress and suffering in a practical way. This is about "compassionate self-talk" (Bassett, 1995)

· **Detachment or being "away" from work:** is a potentially creative yet misunderstood response to stress that could augment wellbeing if done sensitively and mindfully.

Self-compassion, humility and meaningful detachment were located from an heuristic inquiry into psycho-spiritual workplace research. These only offers a new approach for the stressed it also by using a under-utilised methodological approach can assist researchers noting the intuition and inner reflection approach is efficacious in other disciplines. The research also proposes a new, intuitive, *step-by-step*, self-care framework. Of course, ways to enact and measure how well we are immunising the workplace against chronic stress are needed.

The research synthesised self-compassion, humility, and detachment into a preliminary, reflective, self-choice framework for the workplace to inform practice and reflective research. It presented, over a series of published papers, a systematic analysis of similarities and dissimilarities about how the themes engage with each other and speak to one's innate sense of being. This form of reflection contributes the individual's choices in responses to stress-based failure and imperfection.

The emerging conceptual framework contributes an integrated way of reflecting on and encouraging self-care. It provides a way to augment self-awareness and kindly self-acceptance choice. Additionally, it suggests a theoretical basis for further studies into workplace spirituality studies related to stress. The implications for personal healing, sense-making, and training are significant because the research provides new perspectives from which to consider stress. From this and all in all, the five year bricolage informed and heuristic inquiry process let to eight papers of which were incorporated into my doctoral thesis. It is also noted that two, non-thesis papers were explicitly focussed on Christian self-love which arises from the Gospel and

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which is foundational to much chaplaincy and pastoral work around stress at work.

Doctoral published papers

· Paper 1. Self-compassion

Call to compassionate self-care: Introducing self-compassion into the workplace treatment process. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health.*

· Paper 2. Humility

Humility as a force enhancer: Developing leaders and supporting personal resilience and recovery. *Australian Defence Journal.*

· Paper 3. Detachment

A newer form of psycho-spiritual detachment to support those suffering at work. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health.*

· Paper 4. Methodology

The 'tapestry' of bricolage: Extending interdisciplinary approaches to psycho-spiritual self-care research. *Methodological Innovation*.

· Paper 5.

Thematic integration through use of the heuristic inquiry process

Extending the heuristic inquiry research process to enable improved psycho-spiritual self-care choices associated with workplace stress and suffering. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Science.*

At the end of the publication series, the literature, critical analysis and intrinsic illumination affirmed the proposed conceptual framework for praxis and reflection. This helps build theory and points the way to further research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In essence, each successive paper explored the themes that were initially identified in the literature review and critical synthesis. As the publications worked progressively through self-compassion, humility, and meaningful or spiritual detachment there was a discernible affirmation as to how the themes interacted and contributed to the overall research goals.

In terms of theory building, the emerging conceptual framework highlights the interaction of key self-care choices from both conceptual and applied points of view. In fact, what arose was a parallel process that addresses the critical issue of a dearth of research into psycho-spiritual, self-care. Such a process also produced a methodological innovation: the extension of the heuristic inquiry process to support worker self-care research for the first time. In sum, some outcomes were thematically-based self-care choices whereas others were about methodological enhancement. Of note, the parallel processes took place concurrently in a recursive and heuristic inquiry.

The framework outlined now more fully recognises that the researcher and the stressed each in their own way are able to locate, intuit and use self-care choices. This reflects a non-linear hermeneutic movement around the themes of detachment, humility, and self-compassion. The amended conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 highlights the integrative actions concerning self-care and methodological innovation.
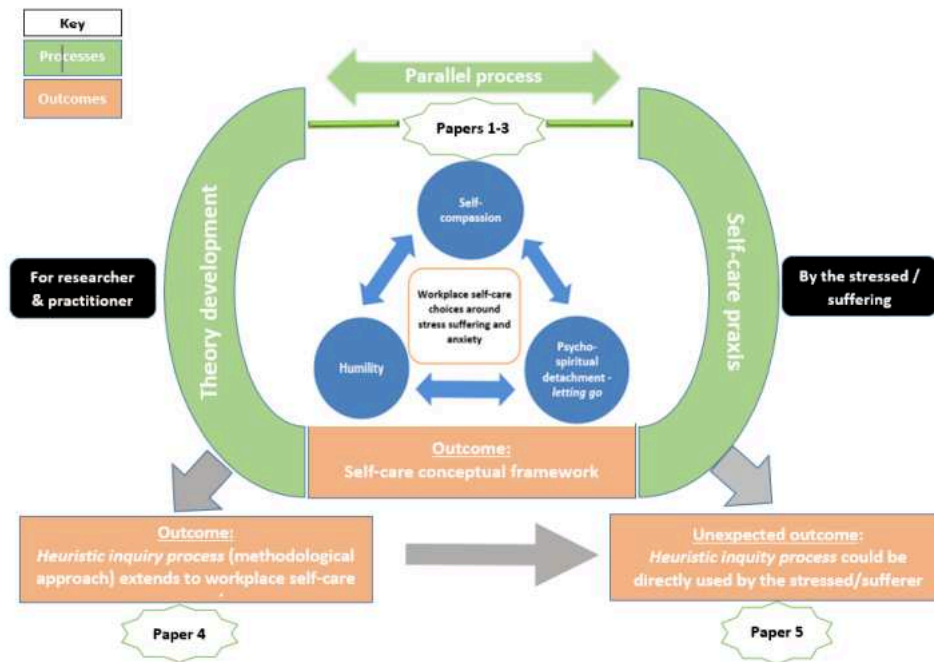

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

The framework, albeit embryonic, shows first, theoretically, that self-compassion, humility, and meaningful, self-kindly detachment work can work together. Second, on a practical level, the stressed takes the necessary self-caring choices that arise from reflecting, intuiting and seeking to make meaningful sense of things. The framework is intended to stimulate further action and research.

In summary, the updated conceptual framework highlights the contribution to knowledge arising from the new self-care synthesis and the heuristic inquiry process. Specifically, it shows the various psycho-spiritual choices that can address self-blame and self-judgment. The framework also highlights opportunities to further explore the integration of theory and praxis along the following lines:

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· Theory: The thesis explored and integrated humility, self-compassion, and meaningful detachment.

· Self-care choices praxis: On a personal level, the research offered a mode to support and guide allied health practitioners and the stressed themselves. This encourages reflection on, dialogue with, and learning from the painful results of stress and suffering.

Newer ways of coping and responding appear to better support employees in the 'new and at times stressful normal' of remote working, creating workplaces that invest in the mental health and wellbeing of its people by building a psychologically positive and connected workplace.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the results of this study, holistic, interdisciplinary approaches to self-care and self-reflect could enable the stressed to make self-caring and meaningful sense of stress using self-compassion, tender and meaningful detachment to reflect on even let go of work. By way of the five published, peer-reviewed papers, this applied research extends understanding of self-compassion psychology and humility-related spirituality by highlighting their commonalities and integrated use in workplace situations.

The research uncovered is about self-kindly inner dialogue, self-care, and meaningful forms of letting go. Another key outcome was the emergence of a self-care conceptual framework. As guided by the research questions, several unique contributions to self-care literature and praxis eventuated, as evidenced by the five, peer-reviewed papers that form the nucleus of this thesis.

According to the study, holistic, interdisciplinary approaches to self-care and self-reflection could enable the stressed to make meaningful sense of stress because they make sense of work self-compassionately and could be able to enact meaningful detachment or letting go from work.

Such applied research extends understanding of self-compassion psychology and humility-related spirituality by highlighting their commonalities and integrated use in workplace situations. Such newer ways of coping and responding to inner need or degradation appear to better support employees on not only stress but could perhaps be useful when stress arises from new and remote ways of working.

The research uncovered is about self-kindly inner dialogue, self-care, and meaningful forms of letting go. Another key outcome was the emergence of a self-care conceptual framework. As guided by the research questions, several unique contributions to self-care literature and praxis eventuated, as evidenced by the five, peer-reviewed papers that form the nucleus of this thesis.

In summary, this paper offers key insights into new ways to ensure workplace stress adap-

tation and the effects of personal choices and responses associated with workplace stress and resilience. This research represents the first attempt to develop theory and praxis relating to psycho-spiritual self-care so as to ameliorate the detrimental effects of harsh self-judgments.

About

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Rev. Professor Peter is an Aust. Army chaplain, post-doctoral researcher, humanitarian leader, company director and corporate governance practitioner who has served on government and charity boards for 25 years. He is an *adjunct Professor of Business* – researching, teaching and publishing in the areas human care, ethics, leadership, PTSD, stress alleviation, meaningful values and organisational culture. Peter has post-graduate psychological and therapy qualifications. He has researched and used key inter-disciplinary workplace care and stress response innovations that help immunise and care for workers and guide leaders in terms of chronic stress and support wellbeing and dignity at work.

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